

Young Voices for Youth Work

A Youth Vision for a Sustainable, Well-Funded, and Inclusive
Ecosystem of Empowerment on Local and European Level



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Executive Summary

In a time of multiple crises, when democratic values are under threat across Europe, the spaces where young people learn to be active citizens are more important than ever. This paper is a message from the grassroots of European youth work, authored by active young people from nine countries. It serves as a statement of concern, a call for action, and an offer of partnership. The draft was discussed during a roundtable consultation with other stakeholders from the field of youth work, politics and administration.

The central message of the paper is that **the future of youth work is directly linked to the future of democracy**. Youth work provides a vital setting for young people to experience how to debate, act collectively, and participate meaningfully. However, these spaces are endangered by systemic problems. The paper identifies five key areas where political action is crucial to safeguard youth work as a pillar of democratic societies:

- 1. Access, Inclusion & Participation:** Youth work must be for everyone, but it is not. Geographical, linguistic, legal, and social barriers exclude countless young people, especially those in rural areas, from refugee backgrounds, and with fewer opportunities. The paper calls for binding action plans to eliminate underrepresentation, based on EU-wide monitoring. This includes better support for multilingualism and mental health needs, adapting funding to cover support for vulnerable groups, and empowering young people as project co-creators.
- 2. Legal Frameworks** and **3. Recognition:** Youth work is unequally recognised across Europe, partly due to the lack of unified legal frameworks. The paper urges coherent legal standards at EU and national levels for equal protection and status. This must be paired with greater political recognition through binding dialogue formats, ensuring that young people and youth workers are involved in policy-making processes that affect them.
- 4. Professionalisation:** Youth workers are the backbone of the sector, yet they often face job insecurity, low pay, overwork, and a lack of career pathways. This leads to a drain of talent and experience. The paper demands the establishment of clear career paths and Europe-wide recognised qualifications for youth work as a profession. This includes setting high standards for practice and training, while obliging public authorities to create the financial conditions that allow organisations to meet these standards and offer fair wages and labour rights.
- 5. Sustainability in Funding and Structures:** The current EU funding landscape, dominated by short-term project grants, creates a permanent precarity. It wrongly assumes stable core funding, which is rare, especially for smaller local and grassroots initiatives. This undermines the very structures needed to implement EU goals. The paper recommends a fundamental shift towards sustainability. This includes making operating grants a regular, accessible part of EU youth programmes, not an exception. The authors advocate for a hybrid funding model combining operating and project grants, the expansion of multi-year framework agreements to ensure planning security, and a significant reduction of bureaucratic burdens in application processes to support the capacity of smaller organisations.

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Why We Speak Up

We, the authors of this paper, are active young people from nine European countries: Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Ukraine. We come from different backgrounds, speak different languages, and live in different realities. But we share a great experience that has brought us together: youth work has empowered us to become active citizens, to shape our communities, and to believe in a common European future.

But today, we are worried. In a time of multiple crises, we feel that the spaces that allow young people like us to grow, to participate, and to find our voice are under threat. And that's not just a problem for us. Youth work is the backbone of a healthy civil society and a vibrant democracy. It provides non-formal education, fosters critical thinking, and builds bridges between people. For many young people, especially those facing social or economic disadvantages, it is the only accessible platform for participation. When these structures are at risk due to a lack of funding, recognition, and reliable frameworks, we risk losing more than just places to meet. We risk weakening the democratic foundation of our societies.

This paper is a statement of concern, a call for action, and an offer of partnership. We are not just speaking up as individuals, but as representatives of **Generation Europe – The Academy**, a network of more than 40 youth organisations in 14 European countries. The programme, coordinated by the International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.), connects local engagement with a European perspective, enabling young people to implement self-determined projects in their communities and collaborate across borders. Its core mission is to make social participation a reality for all young people, regardless of their background, their parents' income, or their success in the formal education system.

The insights and recommendations you will find in this paper are born from this grassroots reality. We have been working on them for several months. Starting with our own lived experiences in local and international projects, we broadened our perspective through in-depth research, interviews with our peers, and dialogues with the dedicated youth work professionals who support us. Finally, we sent out questionnaires across our network and beyond to gather insights from the wider community of practice. This process, while sometimes challenging, was empowering. Although our perspective is rooted in the Generation Europe network, the challenges we have identified – from precarious funding to a lack of recognition – are shared by youth work providers of all sizes across the continent.

We are now turning to you, the decision-makers, stakeholders, and allies in the European Parliament, the Commission, and civil society networks. This paper contains our analysis of the challenges we face, and our concrete proposals for strengthening youth work across Europe. We offer you our hands-on knowledge and our commitment to working together. We invite you to read our recommendations, to discuss them with us, and to join us in securing the future of youth work for the generations to come.

Safeguarding & Enabling Democracy in a Changing World

Our concern for the future of youth work is directly linked to our concern for the future of democracy. While elections are the cornerstone of democratic systems, the resilience of these systems is decided elsewhere: in the everyday spaces where people learn to listen, debate respectfully, and to act collectively. For young people, youth work provides these spaces, serving as a practical training ground for democratic life. It equips us with the skills and the confidence to not just vote, but to participate meaningfully. Democracy also means representation and participation in a community that is providing equal opportunities. This must apply to all young people and those who take care of them: parents, teachers and youth workers.

Democratic participation requires understanding institutions and knowing one's rights. In a world full of misinformation, conspiracy theories and polarisation, democratic education and critical thinking are essential. It enables us to question sources, reflect on different perspectives and engage in dialogue rather than blindly following. This enables citizens to hold leaders accountable through peaceful protests, campaigns, petitions and oversight activities. This prevents democracy from becoming a one-day event at the ballot box.

The sense of a shared European identity is important for solidarity, cooperation, and protecting democracy across the EU. However, it cannot be imposed from above, it must be lived and felt through shared experiences. In reality, this identity is not equally strong. Youth in cosmopolitan cities may experience a stronger European identity due to greater diversity and higher access to mobility opportunities. Young people in rural areas tend to have less access to such opportunities and may feel left behind and disconnected from this identity.

A participant from Sardinia, Italy highlighted that she and other participants from her group are “still not sure what being European means” to them. In our search for the reasons for this we found that **European values and institutions often feel abstract or distant.**

Eurobarometer data confirms the concern: A 2021 survey found that young people feel most influential at the local level (47%), while only 30% of young people feel able to influence matters at EU level.¹

Both, limited access to European youth programmes and other socioeconomic factors play a role in this. Since identity and the sense of being taken seriously come from shared experiences, more support is needed for international projects and opportunities for civic participation. This will help to build a critical, self-determined European identity, based on unity in diversity.

Young people's voices are often underrepresented compared to other interest groups. In a lot of cases they do not have comparable access to decision-makers. Also, they are often described as “the future generation”, but not recognised as actors of the present. This feels disempowering. When you think you can't change anything, you won't. On an individual level,

¹ <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>

this translates to frustration and apathy towards the political system. It can also push conflicts within society and make them more open to simple scapegoat narratives.

Among our peers, **we sense a high level of dissatisfaction with national political systems.** In the face of major crises such as climate change and housing shortages, the gap between generations seems to be widening. This is particularly true when young people feel that they are having to pay the price for decisions made in the past.

Against a common stereotype, the young generation does care. Despite all obstacles, many young people are active advocates for their future. This is not only visible on various social media platforms, but also locally in our cities and communities. Within Generation Europe – The Academy, we heard this determination clearly:

»We are the generation that has better access to information than any before us. What should stop us from using this potential to build a better future?«

We take the claim of being able to participate in shaping society seriously. To prevent frustration from becoming a threat to our societies, such opportunities for participation and organisation must be equally accessible to all young people in Europe.

If a major challenge for democracy is that **many young people feel disconnected**, without a genuine sense of belonging to their community or to Europe as a whole, we need policy approaches that overcome this. Otherwise, such alienation causes more disengagement, and non-participation becomes the norm. This is exactly where youth work can make a difference. If it can succeed in making young people feel connected and capable of shaping their future, then democracy itself becomes stronger.

Sometimes we are judged as too young to deal with politics, but we are motivated to act and to make a change – often encouraged by youth workers who do not have to comply with a curriculum. Youth work acts as a bridge between generations, empowering us to become active. By providing genuine opportunities for participation, it can help to restore trust in institutions. This is particularly important in times of economic difficulties and for those of us who have not had exclusively positive experiences in the formal education system.

Based on our practical experience as active participants in local and international projects, as well as on our research, discussions and surveys, we have identified five areas in which we believe urgent action is needed to ensure that youth work can fulfil its important role of safeguarding democracy and holding our societies together.

Areas of Action and Recommendations

1. Access, Inclusion & Participation

Social exclusion is a major challenge faced by young people across Europe. It can lead to long-term negative impacts such as poor living conditions, limited access to education or employment, economic instability, and declining mental health. This is not merely a perception. Eurostat data from 2024 shows that young adults aged 18-24 have the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion of any age group in the EU, at 26.2%.² These issues are often connected and can create a cycle that is difficult to break. But **youth work can play a critical role in preventing social exclusion** by offering support, informal learning, and opportunities for integration into local communities. It provides young people with safe spaces to grow, develop skills, access peer support, and build meaningful relationships. To fulfil this potential, youth work must be visible, accessible, and inclusive.

The problems related to inclusion, accessibility, and participation in (international) youth work are both systemic and well-documented.³ They affect most importantly young people, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, but also a wide range of other stakeholders, such as youth workers, organisations, and society at large.

Lack of awareness and visibility of youth work opportunities is a significant issue. Many young people are unaware of what youth work is or how they can benefit from it. Insufficient or ineffective promotion is just one of the reasons for this. In many cases, outreach does not extend to the most marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Other aspects are **legal limitations and language barriers**, since they prevent equal access to youth work programmes at both local and international level. In some countries, laws and regulations limit the promotion and announcement of youth work organised by civil society organisations in schools or public spaces. Young people without a secure residence permit may also be unable to participate in international exchanges.

From an immigrant youth perspective, social exclusion exists due to **language barriers**, both local language and English, legal restrictions and lack of culturally sensitive approaches that can make you feel unwelcome or misunderstood. Language difficulties can also limit participation and integration, which in turn deepens social exclusion. This insight is not only supported by our survey among participants and youth work organisations. Back in 2013, a study by the European Commission⁴ confirmed that language barriers are a major obstacle to accessing social services and thus a factor in social exclusion – a challenge that remains to this day.

Due to **funding issues**, local organisations are not able to include all young people in international programmes like youth encounters and exchanges. Additionally, youth workers

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion

³ https://www.zugangsstudie.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Zugangsstudie_en_web.pdf

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/eurydice-study-social-exclusion-2013.pdf>

might lack access to sufficient training on topics such as mental health support, intercultural competence, and inclusion strategies.

Needs regarding mental health among young people are increasing, and youth work is not substantially prepared to offer the help needed. Young people who face exclusion frequently deal with stress, anxiety, trauma, or depression. Without psychological support structures in place, youth work cannot provide the required help. This problem is evident from rising mental health statistics⁵ and youth testimonials that show how urgent the issue of decreasing mental health is. Several articles and reports elaborate on the topic of mental health, highlighting the significance when it comes to working with young people.⁶

Another challenge is that the level of **youth participation in developing and organising youth work** remains inconsistent and sometimes superficial. Although many frameworks emphasise the importance of involving young people in the design of programmes and policies, this is often not the case in practice. Young people are consulted but have no real influence, or the opportunities are not open to all. A UNICEF study⁷ shows that young people often have no real influence, and even when they do, that influence is not truly inclusive or representative. Data collected by the EU⁸ also shows that youth engagement is not consistent across different countries and regions, which again raises the issue of non-representation.

These problems exist because youth work often lacks the resources, visibility and systemic integration necessary to reach all young people, not just those who know where to look. As cultural, legal, economic, and psychological factors compound the issue, social exclusion is a complex issue. To improve conditions in these areas, we recommend the following steps:

1. Greater responsibility of all political levels to **make international youth work projects accessible across all regions, and to actually help organise appropriate participation**. We recommend **EU-wide monitoring** of which regions are currently underserved, and which social groups in the regions have not yet been sufficiently reached. This should be combined with the responsibility of the political levels to draw up **binding action plans** on how this underrepresentation can be eliminated. Measures can range from strengthening and expanding existing youth work structures to supporting efforts to establish new providers and organisations.
2. **Professional investment in outreach** is essential to ensure that youth work extends beyond already active circles. Public communication must be improved at both local and European level, with a focus on content and clarity. Although the European Union recognizes the value of youth work through strategies and funding, there is a clear gap between the objectives and its visibility, especially towards the primary target group: the young people themselves. Many are unaware of youth work opportunities or misunderstand their true purpose. This communication work must be well funded and professionals must be hired to do it, rather than leaving the task solely to educational

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

⁶ <https://eurochild.org/uploads/2025/02/Eurochild-2024-Flagship-Sub-report-on-Mental-Health.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/9701/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Meaningful-Youth-Engagement-2024.pdf>

⁸ <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>

staff, who often have to perform it as unpaid extra work. Public campaigns should include training active young people in communication tasks so that they can speak on their own behalf, but not as a substitute for professional structures. Measures may focus on spaces such as youth centres, schools and online platforms where young people already spend time. This may also include social media campaigns, information materials and digital platforms that present opportunities clearly and accessibly.

3. **Language** remains one of the strongest obstacles for young people to participate fully in European opportunities. Providing multilingual resources, peer support, and simple translation tools can make programmes more accessible. This can also be an issue at the local level for immigrant youth who do not yet speak the national language. This challenge can be addressed by active promotion of language learning and support mechanisms, such as peer mentoring and translation assistance, and clear communication that participation can help improve language skills over time.
4. **Funding systems** should take challenges related to unequal rights and social exclusion into account. European funding recognises, at least to a certain extent, additional costs for special needs in terms of assistance for people with disabilities. In the further development of European funding programmes, additional educational, administrative and care-related costs arising from working with other vulnerable groups must also be recognised. This includes extra tasks connected to visa and residence permits, trauma and mental health, and trust-building with parents in marginalised communities.
5. **As mental health issues become increasingly common** among young people, they are having a growing impact on their ability to participate in youth work. By training youth workers in support and embedding resilience-building workshops into youth projects, programmes can be made safer and more supportive. Access to professional counselling services should also be considered an integral part of inclusive youth work.
6. **Inclusion is not only about access, but also about voice.** Young people should be empowered to co-design methods and be engaged as co-creators of projects. Flexible models of participation, allowing young people to choose how deeply they would like to engage, are crucial for ensuring long-term involvement.
7. **Systemic change requires collaboration.** Sharing good practices across borders, learning from other projects, and working in transnational networks can help spread successful methods of participation and inclusion. Partnerships with schools, municipalities, and civil society organisations can anchor youth work at local and European levels.
8. **Visibility of youth work, especially in institutions of formal education,** should be increased, without compromising its independence. Stronger networking with school social work and extracurricular activities at schools can make it more accessible. Recognition of non-formal learning certificates such as the Youthpass in schools and degree programmes could make youth work more appealing and valued.

9. In some countries, **legal barriers** make it difficult to introduce youth work initiatives within educational institutions. Such obstacles to civil society and democracy-promoting engagement must be removed.
10. **Geographical barriers** such as long commutes to youth work locations can reduce motivation and commitment. This is particularly true in rural areas. Solutions may include providing transport, localising youth work opportunities, offering outreach services such as mobile youth centres, and offering online and hybrid formats.
11. There is also a **need for digital tools** that help make youth policies and programmes more accessible and understandable to young people. A European youth work app could be developed to fill this gap.

2. Legal Frameworks at National and EU Levels

One of the barriers to strengthening youth work in Europe is the lack of a **unified legal framework**. In some EU Member States, such as Finland, Estonia and Germany, laws regulate the obligations of political actors to provide youth work. In Germany, for example, Social Code VIII (SGB VIII) states: “Young people must be provided with the youth work services necessary to promote their development.” This is an objective legal obligation and a mandatory municipal task. Local public youth welfare agencies are legally bound to provide or finance appropriate services. In some other countries, there are no such legally binding obligations, and youth work is organised much more on a voluntary basis.

At EU level, there are the EU Youth Strategy⁹, the European Youth Work Agenda¹⁰ and various strategy papers¹¹, but these do not create any legal obligations for Member States. The European Youth Work Agenda addresses many of the challenges we encounter in our everyday work on European projects. While recognising the different traditions and circumstances in the EU Member States, we encounter very different conditions in different countries, which we believe are at least partly due to the lack of an EU-wide legal framework that provides equal protection for youth work across the Union. Without it, sustainable funding mechanisms, clear career pathways, and professional quality standards cannot be fully developed. This fragmentation leaves the sector underrecognised, underfunded, and without long-term prospects for youth work professionals.

Many young people start their careers in youth work with strong motivation, yet too often they leave the field early. This raises key challenges of recognition, professionalisation, and sustainability. Without stable pathways and support, the sector risks losing talent and impact, which causes major problems for youth work organisations in particular. The **creation of coherent legal frameworks** seems necessary to us to enable recognition, professionalisation and sustainability in youth work throughout the European Union. Recognising subsidiarity and the responsibility of Member States, we call for further development of EU soft law, such as a

⁹ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

¹⁰ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj%3AJOC_2020_415_R_0001

¹¹ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/key-policy-documents-on-youth-work>

Council recommendation with minimum standards for youth work (quality framework, recognition of skills, protection of professionals) and comprehensive monitoring, as well as incentives in EU programmes to promote national frameworks.

3. Recognition of Youth Work

In our surveys and discussions, we have noticed a great deal of concern that **youth work is not recognised equally** in all European countries. The impressions we gained are in line with the results of other studies, such as the European Youth Forum's Research on volunteer-based youth work from 2022¹².

On the one hand, there are countries where youth work is hardly recognised and professional structures are only partially developed (Croatia, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania¹³), and where paid youth work is rare or not recognised either formally or socially. On the other hand, youth workers and young people engaged in youth work also experience a lack of recognition in other countries. Those active in the field of youth work are often missing awareness in the political arena about the importance, potential and methods of non-formal education. For many, youth work seems to equal social work, or it equals school and education. As a result, those who organise non-formal activities outside formal educational institutions find themselves confronted with misunderstandings that cause problems at various levels, with implications for funding, infrastructure, opportunities for creating paid positions, and so on.

Despite existing difficulties with European funding programmes, which we will discuss later in this paper, there was clear acknowledgement among respondents for programmes such as Erasmus+, which enable much of their work in the first place. Feedback on support from national and regional policy levels varied greatly, ranging from mentions of regional support to frustrated statements, for example:

»There's no national policy helping us. Mostly we can try to use the European (not just EU but also COE's) policies to advocate locally. Unfortunately, most of the time, local administration just doesn't have any awareness or understanding of what the European level policies mean.«

When asked what is lacking at national and EU level that would help their organisation to work more effectively, respondents pointed to the **lack of national legislation** to safeguard youth work, **the lack of tools at national level** and **insufficient training opportunities locally**. Based on these findings, we recommend the following measures:

1. At a political level, we need to build a greater understanding of what youth work is, and about its impact and importance. The youth sector needs to be in **constant dialogue** with decision-makers. Politicians should also feel responsible for organising exchange formats on a regular basis, and for providing those involved with the necessary resources to participate on an equal footing. As a result, the community of practice will

¹² https://www.youthforum.org/files/YFJ_volunteerbasedyouthwork_v8_WEB.pdf

¹³ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261815/Practice%20architectures%20revisited.pdf>

also gain a deeper understanding of political conditions and opportunities for positive change.

2. Both the youth work sector and political decision-makers should work towards ensuring that **young people and youth workers are involved in youth policy and decision-making** in the field of youth work. Concrete and binding formats should also be developed for this purpose.
3. **Cooperation** between youth work, schools, universities, and other institutions should be promoted and funded, building networks that enhance recognition and legitimacy.
4. Youth workers need to be empowered to lobby for youth work. Decision-makers should be **invited to youth work events, conferences, and major activities** – especially European level events.
5. **Networking and cooperation between European partners** must be strengthened, particularly between those who have institutionalised frameworks for youth work and those who do not. Decision-makers at all political levels should work together with those affected to promote the introduction of strategies, guidelines and framework conditions also at national level.

4. Professionalisation

Youth work is often perceived as voluntary rather than professional labour. It is not fully recognised as a profession in all countries, and structured degree programmes, such as those offered to educators in the formal education system, often do not exist at all. As many organisations providing youth work rely on short-term project grants, youth workers often face high job insecurity, freelance work instead of permanent employment, low pay, limited labour rights, and few opportunities for skill development. Many youth workers leave the sector early due to this insecurity, under-recognition, and lack of structured pathways. To illustrate how youth workers think about their situation, we'd like to share these anonymised quotes from our survey of people working in European youth work organisations:

»The value of youth work is still under-recognised everywhere, even in the countries with the (relatively) best funding. And so is the role of youth workers, whether they're freelancers or staff. Our work shouldn't be treated as a nice to have or a fun volunteer service, but instead as the profession that it is: a job where mutual trust between youngsters and youth workers needs to be built, often from nothing within just a few days. Where activities need to be planned, carried out and evaluated. Where informal time needs to be filled with meaningful but fun encounters.«

»We're working intensely long hours and usually more consecutive days than our respective worker's protection rights allow. We're working with the kids, and afterwards finalise the project management from report to budget, after we also have written the project applications in the beginning. We're jacks of all trades, and just because we cannot be put inside a box doesn't mean that our work should be devalued.«

These statements show how closely the **lack of recognition for youth work as a profession is linked to difficult financial and structural conditions**. The problems seem to be mutually dependent and intensify each other: if a field of work is not recognised as a valuable profession, there is a lack of structured training pathways, of permanently funded positions, and of financial resources. But this close connection between the problems also opens up opportunities for action: structural acknowledgement of youth work as a profession, with the associated institutional consequences, can be a measure against the lack of recognition and poor conditions for the entire field of work. We therefore recommend the following measures:

1. **Create clear career pathways**, training opportunities, degrees and accreditation systems for youth workers, recognising competences gained. One step could be to create **degree programmes in youth work and non-formal education**, for example at universities offering qualifications that are recognised throughout Europe, while ensuring accessibility to anyone who wants to work in this field.¹⁴
2. Set **standards for professional practice, training and quality frameworks** to ensure credibility and legitimacy, combined with an effective obligation on governments and local authorities to create the financial and structural conditions in which youth work providers can meet these standards.
3. Political actors at all levels should feel responsible for **securing labour rights, fair wages and social security** for youth workers.

5. Sustainability in Funding and Structures

A key problem faced by many organisations, especially smaller ones, is that **long-term funding** (in opposition to short-term project grants) **is hardly accessible**. The large number of smaller, locally based organisations plays an indispensable role in providing local and international youth work opportunities across Europe. So there is a clear contradiction between the political, social and research-based demand to create sustainable structures that provide reliable programmes, facilities and contact persons for young people and the way in which youth work funding is largely organised. From our own experience and from discussions and surveys with those who organise youth work on the ground, it is clear that those responsible are under considerable pressure to maintain youth work services as best they can. One exemplary statement was:

»We are running behind because we don't have funds and we are trying our best. My wellbeing is not so good but I had a burnout and I started to set boundaries and to learn that maybe things will take more time.«

¹⁴ The working group on 'Youth Work as a Profession' during the European Symposium "Youth Work in Europe: Mission (Im)possible?", held on 13 November 2023 in Dortmund, proposed the "Creation of a pan-European interdisciplinary Master's programme in youth work that includes a significant proportion of internships in youth work settings and has a strong international youth work dimension" and the "Creation and implementation of a modular (re)qualification programme for a career change into youth work based on the European Competence Framework for Youth Work".
<https://generationeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/symposium-youthwork-mission-impossible.pdf>

This is not just anecdotal. A 2025 report by the European Court of Auditors¹⁵ reveals a critical issue in how the EU funds non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Under the EU's internal policy programmes managed by the European Commission, NGOs primarily receive project-based funding. Between 2021 and 2023, only €0.3 billion of the total €4.8 billion awarded to NGOs were operating grants to cover core costs. This highlights how rare stable long-term funding is. The problem is particularly severe in the youth sector. The two main EU funding programmes for youth work, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), are largely designed to finance specific projects like youth exchanges and other mobility and cooperation activities. Providing structural, long-term support for organisations is not a primary goal of these programmes and is extremely limited.

The **European Union's funding logic seems to assume that all youth work organisations can secure their core funding from national, regional, or private sources**, with EU grants simply adding extra international projects on top. However, for many organisations implementing Erasmus+ and ESC projects, this is far from reality. In many countries and regions, national or local public funding is either insufficient or not accessible to them at all. Worryingly, this project-focused logic is spreading. A growing number of private foundations and public funders prefer to support short-term, "innovative" projects. They are less willing to take responsibility for ensuring the sustainable maintenance of existing organisations and networks, which are needed for being able to develop and implement projects.

As a result, **the stability of many youth work organisations is under serious threat**. Often, their work is only maintained through insecure employment conditions, enormous personal commitment of their staff, freelancers and volunteers, and a great deal of unpaid overtime. This is not just a problem for the organisations and the young people who rely on their services. It can also be a major challenge for the European funding programmes themselves, as they depend on stable local organisations to develop, apply for, and implement the very projects the EU wants to see.

In addition, there are administrative burdens associated with project management and uncovered costs for project development and application, which often cause great difficulties, especially for smaller local organisations. If these necessary expenditures continue to be barely considered and funded, there is a risk that European programmes will be less effective in areas where they are particularly needed to establish and expand youth work services. In light of this, we consider the following measures to be important:

1. Make **operating grants** a regular, fixed part of Erasmus+ and other youth programmes, not just the exception. Recognising political realities, this will require re-prioritisation and, where necessary, additional budgetary resources.
2. Develop a **hybrid funding model** that combines operating grants with project grants. This could ensure the survival of organisations and reduce their dependence on annual project calls, while still ensuring accountability through project results.

¹⁵ https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2025-11/SR-2025-11_EN.pdf

3. Expansion of and easier access to **multi-year framework agreements**, using accreditations and similar procedures. Instead of annual calls, EU and national authorities could establish funding cycles of three to five years to provide organisations with stability for planning medium-term strategies.
4. Support for the development of clear, **long-term national youth work strategies linked to EU instruments**, so that funding and structures are consistent at all levels.
5. Develop additional funding models that **incentivise Member States to supplement EU funding with national/local contributions**.
6. Create a **unified EU database on youth work funding**. This would improve transparency, enable comparisons between Member States and help smaller organisations to identify available opportunities more easily.
7. Reduce **administrative and bureaucratic burdens** for organisations in general, and in particular for applications for operating and project grants.
8. Support **capacity building for small organisations**. Simplify application procedures and provide technical assistance or training so that local and grassroots organisations can compete fairly with larger, established organisations.

Reflections from the Roundtable Consultation

To ensure that our recommendations are viable and landing firmly in **the reality of European policy-making**, we invited key stakeholders to discuss the draft of this paper. Hosted in Brussels in cooperation with the European Policy Centre (EPC), a roundtable discussion aimed to test our recommendations against the expertise of other youth work actors and those who shape the frameworks of European youth policy. The gathering included representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe, alongside voices from National Agencies, philanthropic foundations, and umbrella organisations such as the European Youth Forum and the Alliance of Youth Workers Associations.¹⁶

The consultation validated the core diagnosis. Institutional representatives described the analysis as comprehensive and confirmed that the challenges identified mirror the **systemic hurdles** observed at governance level. Stakeholders emphasised that for youth work to be resilient, it must not shy away from its role in democratic defence. The feedback highlighted that professionalisation of youth work and formal recognition of non-formal education are not just technical details, but essential for securing sustainable framework conditions.

A central topic was the ongoing **struggle for resources**. A shared message was the need to improve access to funding for small, local and rural organisations. Stakeholders from the field of policy-making confirmed that existing programmes do not yet reach these actors sufficiently. While the ambition for a substantial increase of youth funding in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework appears just as necessary as it is facing tough negotiations, the consultation clarified that funding strategies also must be smarter and more accessible. Proposals were made to further develop existing instruments to support long-term structures, rather than relying exclusively on short-term project cycles. Furthermore, the dialogue underscored the necessity of connecting European policy directly with local implementation.

Another focus concerned the development of **youth participation**. Stakeholders from the field of youth work described the current youth dialogue formats as valuable but imperfect, pointing to the lack of follow-up and the risk of results not being implemented. It was also stressed that co-management models offer opportunities for more meaningful power-sharing. Several recognised this paper as a valuable contribution to this development. Crucially, the need to break out of the "EU bubble" was highlighted. Stakeholders urged the network to also take the demands directly to national ministries and local decision-makers, noting that the battle for recognition of youth work is often won or lost at the domestic level.

Overall, the consultation demonstrated a strong alignment between the ambitions of young people and the priorities of institutional stakeholders. It signals an encouraging readiness to work together and provides momentum for the **next steps**: deepening alliances, engaging decision-makers and ensuring that the voices and needs of young people shape the future of youth work. The consultation confirmed that even though it's an uphill struggle, our vision is both necessary and politically viable, provided we build strong sustainable alliances.

¹⁶ For a full list of participants, see page 3.

Our Commitment

The challenges facing youth work across Europe are significant, but so is its potential. Throughout this paper, we have outlined how youth work serves as a vital training ground for democracy, a catalyst for social inclusion, and a cornerstone of active European citizenship. The analysis and recommendations presented here are the result of a comprehensive process rooted in our lived experiences and those of our peers across the continent. We offer them as our contribution to a crucial debate – as a solid basis for further discussions, and for the further development of policy approaches and strategies.

Safeguarding democracy and ensuring equal opportunities is a shared responsibility.

The challenges are complex and there are no simple solutions. But this is why collaboration is essential. We, as young people and youth work actors, cannot and should not tackle these systemic issues alone. We need you, the political decision-makers and stakeholders, to create the supportive legal and financial frameworks that allow our work to thrive.

Our commitment is embedded in the structure and strategy of our network, Generation Europe – The Academy. We have already brought together young people, youth workers, researchers, and policymakers from all over Europe at two European Youth Work Symposia – "Youth Work – Mission (Im)possible?"¹⁷ (2023) and "Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers"¹⁸ (2024) – to foster dialogue and identify common ground. A new Erasmus+ cooperation partnership in our network, "Youth Voices Rising"¹⁹, directly addresses a core recommendation of this paper: empowering young people to become effective advocates for their own interests. Through a comprehensive needs analysis, training formats for local and international advocacy, and the support for youth-led campaigns, we are building the capacity for meaningful political participation for all, especially those whose voices are seldom heard.

As Generation Europe – The Academy is entering its next three-year programme phase from 2026, our work will be structured around three interconnected pillars: 'Youth Cooperation' to foster local work and grassroots international exchange, 'Next Steps' to support experienced young people in becoming mentors in their local groups and communities, and 'Advocacy' to systematically carry the experiences from our network into political processes. **We are eager to continue this dialogue, to share our expertise, and to collaborate on tangible solutions.** We therefore call on you to support us in three key measures: firstly, to reform EU funding in order to prioritise sustainability through a hybrid model of operating and project grants; secondly, to create coherent legal frameworks that recognise youth work as a profession; and thirdly, to establish binding dialogue formats that ensure young people become co-creators of their future. These are not just administrative changes; they are necessary investments in the resilience of European democracy.

¹⁷ <https://generationeurope.org/en/symposium-2023/>

¹⁸ <https://generationeurope.org/en/symposium24/>

¹⁹ <https://youth-voices.eu/>